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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether the expressed attitudes of a male or female companion might influence a woman to report sex-role attitudes more conforming to her companion's attitudes. Forty female college students were paired with a male or female confederate who expressed either sexist attitudes or feminist attitudes. The pairs read and discussed a case study in which a husband was considering compromising his own career to follow his wife's career. The results showed that subjects were more likely to report more conservative sex-role attitudes when paired with a man than when paired with a woman, and were more likely to side with the husband in the case study when paired with a sexist partner. Preliminary results of a follow-up study which included male subjects showed that women reported more feminist attitudes with more feminist partners while men reported more conservative attitudes when paired with more feminist partners. (Author)

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Paper presented at the American Psychological Association
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Effect of Attitude of Partner on Sex Role Attitudes

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Abstract

The study reported here examined whether the expressed attitudes of a male or female companion might influence a woman to report sex-role attitudes more conforming to her companion's attitudes. Forty women college students were paired with a male or a female confederate who expressed either "sexist" attitudes or "feminist" attitudes. The pairs read and discussed a case study in which a husband was considering compromising his own career to follow his wife's career. The results showed that subjects were more likely to report more conservative sex-role attitudes when paired with a man than when paired with a woman, and were more likely to side with the husband in the case study when paired with a "sexist" partner. Preliminary results of a follow-up study which includes male subjects show that women report more feminist attitudes with more feminist partners while men report more conservative attitudes with more feminist partners.

Effect of Attitude of Partner on Sex Role Attitudes

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Recent research on sex-role attitudes suggests that there are still strong differences in attitudes between those expressing more conservative, or "traditional" attitudes towards the roles of men and women, and those expressing more feminist attitudes (e.g., Biaggio, Mohan, & Baldwin, 1985; Smith and Self, 1981). The attitudes seem to reflect the trend toward conservatism in general political attitudes over the past decade (e.g., Corbett, Rudoni, & Frankland, 1981; Renzetti, 1987). Renzetti (1987) found that subjects were reluctant to identify themselves as feminist although they did feel strong support for the ideals.

Our study was designed to examine whether college women would be more likely to express feminist attitudes with a partner who also expresses feminist attitudes than when with a more traditional partner.

Methods

Subjects. Forty women volunteers were given course credit for participating in an experiment. Two confederates, one man and one woman, were used in the study. The confederates were told to either reflect sexist attitudes or feminist attitudes while discussing the case (a story about a husband who is considering compromising his career to follow his wife's career in computers). The subjects were randomly assigned to interact with either a sexist man, a feminist man, a sexist woman, or a feminist woman.

Procedure. The subjects were told upon arrival that they were going to analyze a case study with another subject (actually a confederate). The confederate was asked to read the case aloud and they were to discuss it. They were told that they would fill out a questionnaire after the discussion. the confederates were instructed to make three comments during the discussion. The sexist confederate said "She's the computer programmer?", "I don't think any man should quit his job for a woman.", and "The woman should stay at home with the kids". the feminist confederate said "IBM sounds like a better job. Let her take it.", "She has a chance of making more money than a teacher.", "I say it's the husband's turn to stay home with the kids".

After the case had been read and all three comments had been made, the experimenter entered the room and gave the subject and the confederate a questionnaire on which they rated their attitudes about the characters in the case and about sex-roles in general. Some of the questions were excerpted from Spence & Helmreich's Attitudes Toward Women Scale (1978). They were told that their questionnaires would be exchanged with their partners so that they could discuss the case further (in order to solicit "public" attitudes). After they had completed the questionnaire, the confederate was asked to leave, the experimenter debriefed the subject and questioned her for a manipulation check (only one subject suspected that the other person was a confederate).

Results and Discussion

Analyses of variance were performed on the questions on the questionnaire. On all questions concerning sex-roles in the home and in the

workplace, there was a trend for those paired with males to express more sexist attitudes and for those paired with "sexist" partners to express more sexist attitudes. Three of the six questions had significant effects. All questions were rated from 1 to 6, with 1 representing "disagree completely" and 6 representing "agree completely."

On the question "I believe that the wife should not take the job offer, allowing the husband to keep his", there was a significant main effect for condition (sexist partner vs. feminist partner). As shown in Table 1, although most subjects tended to disagree with the statement, being paired with a more traditional partner significantly affected their expressed attitudes to be more in agreement with their partners ($F(1,36)=4.11$, $p=.05$, effect size $r=.32$[1]). The means in the table show that it was the male partner that had the most effect on the subjects.

On the question "Men should share in the household tasks such as washing the dishes and doing the laundry", those paired with a man reflected a significantly more sexist attitude than those paired with a woman ($F(1,36)=6.70$, $p=.01$, effect size $r=.40$). The means are shown in Table 2. On this question, the sexist attitude of the male did not have any effect.

On the question "The intellectual leadership of a community should be largely in the hands of men.", those paired with a man reported a more traditional attitude than those paired with a woman ($F(1,36)=5.74$, $p=.02$, effect size $r=.37$). The means are shown in Table 3. Again, we can see that it was the sexist male that elicited the most traditional attitudes from his partners.

The relatively small sample sizes in each of the four groups may account for the lack of significance on the remaining questions, since they reflected trends in similar directions as the three questions discussed here. A follow-up study is being conducted , using male subjects as well as females.

Study II - Preliminary results

Procedure. In a follow-up study, we have run 79 subjects (28 men and 51 women) who were pretested with an attitude questionnaire designed by the authors to determine whether the subjects held more "sexist" or more "feminist" attitudes. A factor analysis was conducted on the items on the questionnaire. Two principal factors were revealed, one concerning sex roles in family and occupation (e.g., conflicts between parenting and careers), and one concerning political attitudes (e.g., support for the ERA and government-funded child care). We added the items loading on the roles factor to get an attitude score for each subject (since our stimulus in the study deals with family and occupational roles, this factor was most appropriate). We did a median split (separately for men and women) to classify our subjects as "sexist" or "feminist."

Upon their arrival in the laboratory, they were told that they would be discussing a business case with a partner. We told them about their partner (based on the pretest questionnaire). Actually, the "partner" was described as one of four bogus partners - a sexist man, a sexist woman, a feminist man, or a feminist woman. They were told to read the case (the same one used in

the previous study), and to complete a questionnaire about the case and about sex roles in general. They were told that they would then exchange questionnaires with their partners (who were supposedly in the next room) and would discuss the case. They were to believe that their partners would see their questionnaire, so that any effect of the partner would influence their answers on the questionnaire. When they completed the questionnaire, they were debriefed.

Results. Analyses of the data collected so far show support for the results of the previous study. A 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 Anova (subject sex by subject attitude by partner sex by partner attitude) with 79 subjects produces an average of only 4-5 subjects in each cell, so these results are not as strong as expected when the full study of 160 subjects is completed.

On the question concerning the business case, "who should give up their job to stay home with the children?" (rated 1 to 6, 1 is the husband and 6 is the wife), men rated the husband more than did the women ($F=6.02$, $p=.02$, effect size $r=.30$). There was a trend for women to report a more sexist attitude when paired with a sexist partner and men to report a more feminist attitude when with a sexist partner (interaction of subject sex by partner attitude $F=2.93$, $p=.09$, effect size $r=.21$). The means in Table 4 indicate that it is the women with sexist partners who rated the question with most traditional attitudes.

On the question "A man should share in the household tasks such as washing dishes and doing laundry" (1=agree and 6=disagree), there was a main effect for subject sex ($F=3.87$, $p=.05$, effect size $r=.24$) indicating that women agree more with the statement (means are in Table 5). There was also a

main effect for subject attitude, indicating that feminist subjects agree more with the statement (mean=1.15) than do sexist subjects (mean=1.61), although all subjects tended to agree strongly with the statement. There was a main effect for partner's attitude, indicating that subjects reacted to their partner's attitudes by reporting opposite attitudes (means are in Table 5). That is, subjects agreed more with the statement when with sexist partners than when with feminist partners. An interaction between subject sex and partner attitude was not quite significant ($F=3.57$, $p=.06$, effect size $r=.23$). The means in Table 5 suggest a trend for male subjects to be the most reactionary - reporting less feminist attitudes when with feminist partners, while there is little difference in the other cells.

Conclusion

The results of both studies suggest that one's reported attitudes towards sex-roles can be influenced by the expressed attitudes of those one is with (or thinks one will be with). This may help explain the evidence that women's attitudes are "becoming more conservative" in the 80's - perhaps they are not changing so much as the public reporting of these attitudes is being affected by the growing conservatism in our culture. As the public pendulum swings back to more liberalism in general, we may see that today's college-age women will more readily admit the feminist attitudes they may actually hold.

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Footnote

1. The effect size, *r*, serves as a useful index of the magnitude of the effect reported by the customary significance statistics (Rosenthal & Rubin, 1982). In light of the varying sample sizes in social research, we feel that the effect size estimate is one of the most important statistics. The one used here, *r*, is defines as $\sqrt{F/(F + df)}$, when *F* has only one *df* in the numerator, as is the case in all the results reported here (Cohen, 1977; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1984). For those more used to working with *SS* and *MS* directly, *r* is also equivalent to $\sqrt{\text{SS for effect}/(\text{SS for effect} + \text{SS error})}$.

Table 1

Mean Ratings on Question "I believe that the wife should not take the job offer, allowing the husband to keep his"

1=disagree completely and 6=agree completely

Ns are in parentheses

Confederate Sex	Condition: Sexist	Feminist	Mean
Male	3.00 (12)	1.88 (8)	2.55
Female	2.83 (12)	2.00 (8)	2.50
Mean	2.92	1.94	2.525

Table 2

Mean Ratings on Question "Men should share in the household tasks such as washing the dishes and doing the laundry"

1=disagree completely and 6=agree completely

Ns are in parentheses

Confederate Sex	Condition: Sexist	Feminist	Mean
Male	5.50 (12)	5.50 (8)	5.50
Female	6.00 (12)	5.88 (8)	5.95
Mean	5.75	5.69	5.725

Table 3

Mean Ratings on Question "The intellectual leadership of a community should be largely in the hands of men"

1=disagree completely and 6=agree completely

Ns are in parentheses

Confederate Sex	Condition: Sexist	Feminist	Mean
Male	1.50 (12)	1.12 (8)	1.31
Female	1.00 (12)	1.00 (8)	1.00
Mean	1.25	1.06	1.175

Table 4 - Study II

Mean Ratings on Question

"Who should give up their job to stay home with the children?"

1=husband, 6=wife

Ns are in parentheses

Partner Attitude	Subject Sex: Men	Women	Mean
Sexist	2.54 (11)	3.81 (26)	3.43
Feminist	2.88 (17)	3.16 (25)	3.05
Mean	2.75	3.49	3.23

Table 5

Mean Ratings on Question "Men should share in the household tasks such as washing the dishes and doing the laundry"

1=agree and 6=disagree

Ns are in parentheses

Partner Attitude	Subject Sex: Men	Women	Mean
Sexist	1.18 (11)	1.19 (26)	1.19
Feminist	1.94 (17)	1.24 (25)	1.53
Mean	1.64	1.22	1.37